Sec 5th

THE CARE OF THE EARTH
Genesis 1:26-2:3
Matthew 5:1-5
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From the beginning of time, the productivity of the earth has been the focus of humankind's deepest and most profound feeling. The harvest has been the event around which much ancient religion was organized: the harvest, plus the fertility, the reproductive capacity which results in new life. mysterious, marvelous ~~animal and plant life~~. Human beings have been bowing down before since it first occurred to someone to bow down.

There ~~is some of that in an American Thanksgiving~~. The earth has yielded its increase: the grain is in. The prices aren't what we wish they were so the grain may stay in the barn ~~storage~~ for awhile. But it's in: the miracle has happened again. ~~The natural world has shown itself to be mostly reliable~~ And as all the people before us have done we breathe a corporate and grateful sigh of ~~gratitude~~ relief this week; life is possible for another year, at least.

There is something of the harvest festival in Thanksgiving. However, it is both less and more than that. ~~But it is that, and more, really~~. The people of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, whose harvest feast we remember and emulate, did not have much to celebrate actually. Half the people who started out on the Mayflower were dead. All but three families had lost someone. They had barely survived the first winter, ~~only because the Mayflower had remained in the Bay, but it was~~

survival at its barest. The first spring they planted the barley they had brought. The peas. The barley did poorly; the peas failed altogether. They were going to live another year because the corn, given to them by the Indians who also showed them how to plant it, had done well. When they harvested and ground it they discovered, to their delight, that there were two pounds of corn meal per day for each of them for the coming winter. And so, they would not starve.

It was something less than a celebration of abundance and nature's kindness. Nature had been rather tight-fisted, as it turned out a matter of fact. Those who had buried spouses, children, parents in the cold, rocky soil, would not have been pollyannish about divine providence. What they celebrated was the fact that they were alive: that they had been given the strength, creativity, they needed plus some good fortune, they celebrated the fact that circumstances had forced on them a partnership with nature which had worked. Governor Bradford had written: wrote "The whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue. If they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean they had passed, and was now a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world." What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His Grace." They learned how to depend on the strength and resourcefulness God promises to give his people. They also learned to live

in cooperation with the forces of that natural world which, w~~as~~ they had seen, were perfectly capable of wiping them away as if they had never existed. ~~Both ideas~~ of those ideas are important. Both are worth preserving. Both are close to the center of Christian Faith and Life.

Jesus said that the meek will inherit the earth. To which Madeleine L'Engle has responded: "Good - they're the only ones we can trust with the place." There are libraries written about the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." What a curious thing to say. The ~~scholars point out that blessed means "happy" and that~~ there is a bit of discrepency between Jesus' statements and the happiness most of the people of the world spend their lives pursuing. The humble, the mourners, the meek, the merciful - are not necessarily our description of the happy ~~life~~. The people who think about it suggest that Jesus was talking about how it is in God's kingdom, which is not a place so much as it is a state of being which keeps showing up in the life of the world ~~briefly~~. The meek inheriting the earth is how it is in God's Kingdom: it is how God meant it to be. And who are the meek? Not the weak, the retiring, the uninvolved. The meek are the ~~unproud~~ unproud, the unarrogant: that is, the gracious; the ones who are always grateful for the gifts life keeps giving. They are the ones God wants to own the earth. The Pilgrim fathers and mothers sound to me like the meek, ~~as a matter of fact~~ on that first Thanksgiving.

Our attitude about the earth which sustains us may be the most vital topic, and therefore the most appropriate for Christian concentration. Unfortunately, it is rarely a dramatic issue, and it is becoming a partisan political issue. Unfortunate - yet long before it is political it is a very basic human issue.

It is a vitally important issue because, for the first time in history, our species is having a major impact on the earth. It's our numbers: we have obeyed the Genesis admonition to be fruitful and multiply better than any other Biblical suggestion. And our technology; our ability to take things from the earth, change them, use them up, and alter the whole system in the process. You have to think about it for awhile before it sinks in. The air pollution in London in the 18th century was worse than it has ever been since. But, within the context of the entire ecosystem, the human race didn't start making a dent until recently. Before we lived in harmony. Now we're changing the system. Behind those changes is a lot of thoughtlessness and more seriously, arrogant contempt for our friend, the earth. Native Americans who knew how to live in cooperation with the earth, who called the earth mother, brother, sister, and knew how important it was to leave the land as one found it, were astounded by a lot of characteristics of the invaders when they had the leisure Europeans.

who, for centuries, understood the concept of living together with other life on the earth,

~~of observing.~~ Slaughter of buffalo without regard for the future enraged Western Indians, and hunting for sport was an idea they could not comprehend.

It is not a good idea to romanticize any people. ~~In fact, people don't hold up well under that pressure.~~ Native Americans were not perfect - "Noble Savages" turn out to be no more noble than their counterparts in three button suits. And in fact, living in perfect harmony with nature can mean dying of an epidemic which is what had happened to a large percentage of the Native Americans who lived along the Eastern seaboard in the years prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims.

Native Americans, as part of their religion we are just getting around to studying & appreciating.

Generally, however, ~~they~~ regarded the earth as a precious all~~y~~, and the people who came here from other countries seemed to regard it as either an enemy to be conquered or an infinite warehouse of raw material placed here for their comfort alone. Rightly or wrongly those attitudes have greatly influenced our history and, more to the point, continue to influence the present. and will -disastrously- influence the future.

Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloane Kettering ~~Cancer~~ Clinic, who is a bit of a prophet in laboratory coat, writes:

"What I would like to know is: how should I feel about the earth these days? When has all the old nature gone? ~~When~~

~~became of the wild, writhing, unapproachable mass of life of the world, and what happened to our old, panicky excitement about it?~~ Just in fifty years, since I was a small boy in a suburban town, the world has become a structure of steel and plastic, ~~intelligible and diminished~~. Mine was a puzzling maple grove of a village on the outskirts of New York City, and it vanished entirely, trees and all. It is now apartment buildings, sprouting out of matrix of cement flooded and filled over an area that once contained 25,000 people who walked on grass. Now I live in another, more distant town, on a street with lawn and trees, and at night I can hear the soft sound of cement, moving like incoming tide, down the Sunrise Highway from New York." [The Medussa and the Snail, p. 88]

If it is true, that at the heart of the Western world-view is an antipathy toward the earth, if not an outright contempt, where did it come from? Some have suggested that it has its roots in that Greek dualism which taught that the material world was evil while the spiritual world was good. The earth, the flesh, the body - were phenomena to be escaped transcended. Religion was a progressive growing away from the material to the spiritual.

There is, after all, a peculiar irony in ~~Sam Keen pointed out in an early book the~~ irony of a morality which is embarrassed by the human body and will

T.V. I am ~~advocating~~ suggesting that those of us with children walk over to the TV, shut it off and say - that's obscene whenever life is violated.

not allow little children to view it, but shows them fully clothed human bodies being shot, stabbed, burned, drowned, mutilated and dropped out of airplanes, thousands and thousands of times on television before ~~a child is twelve~~ they are adolescents.

~~Keen is not alone in suggesting that~~ We reap what we sew in violence to adult murders by ~~calling~~ sex pornography and killing but killing children is good, family entertainment. It reflects contempt for creation, at the very least.

Some have suggested that ~~Environmentalist sometimes call~~ the Judeo/Christian tradition is responsible for contempt toward the earth and ~~community to account for the attitude, suggesting~~ that it is a logical consequence of the Genesis description of creation. Humanity is there given dominion over creation and told that the earth is to be used. Some enviromentalists suggest that Genesis is responsible for ~~at the heart of our culture is a wrong~~ attitude which allows us to use the earth without any thought about the long range effect of our behavior. But Genesis does not give carte blanche. God retains ownership of the earth in the Bible. Human beings are to be the Trustees, the Stewards, the current managers of the place. It is not ours to do with as we wish.

The future will require that kind of thinking from Christian people, simply because the problems we are causing the earth are urgent. Where in the world did we get the idea that we had the right to eliminate a species in the chain

of life? Yet that is what we have done and are doing. I have a love affair with whales, gorillas, tigers, wolves. ~~I never realized the connection between those animals and perhaps the unconscious reason for my interest.~~ None of them are going to be around very long it seems. Unless we change our behavior, you and I will be the last human beings to live on earth with them. Again Lewis Thomas manages to say it pointedly: "As for the animals ~~we will never have enough plastic bags for the bodies.~~ soon the only survivors will be the cattle and the sheep for the feeding of us, and the dogs and cats in our houses, fed while it lasts on the flesh of whales. ~~I~~ We have dominated and overuled nature ~~, and from~~ now on the earth is ours, a kitchen garden until we learn to make our own chlorophyll and float it out in the sun inside plastic membranes. We will build Scarsdale on Mt. Everest. (p. 89) ~~"The Animals Do Judge Us", Madeline L'Engle entitled a poem on the subject~~.

It can only be something near contempt for earth which allows us to contemplate ~~the obliteration of all life in nuclear war~~. A New York Times editorial last week quoted T. K. Jones, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, to the effect that the U.S. could recover from all-out nuclear war in from two to four years. The key, he said, was for people to dig holes and get under three feet of dirt. "If there

are enough shovels around, everyone's going to make it," Mr. Jones said. [New York Times, Nov. 15, 1982]

And the environment. Reasonable people are not suggesting a Walden Pond purity as a serious model for the high-tech world we are becoming. We can't all live in the woods. We need energy and we will contunue to need energy. ~~To act as if that were negotiable is a waste energy~~. To act as if that were negotiable is a waste of time. ~~But the forces are now in the chicken coop and everybody knows it~~. Russell Peterson, former Republican Governor of Delaware, Head of President Ford's Environmental Council and President of the Audubon Society, pointed out that people who made their careers fighting against environmental protection regulations are now in charge of enforcing those regulations.

Peterson quotes David Stockman's 1980 speech to the National Association of Manufacturers:

> "I keep reading that there are 170 lakes dead in New York that will no longer carry fish. And it occurred to me to ask the question: 'How much are the fish worth - and does it make sense to spend billions of dollars controlling emissions from sources in Ohio - if you're talking about a very marginal number of dollar value, either in recreational terms or in commercial terms.'" [see New York Times Magazine, 10/31/82]

What we need is a conversion, an honest religious conversion which, quite simply, overturns our way of looking at the earth. We aren't getting their talking about the Ozone layer, CO^2 content, acid rain, and the safety standards at the Zimmer Nuclear plant. Those issues, with blinding speed, become Democrat-Republican issues, Liberal-Conservative issues. I am suggesting that for them of us who see ourselves as children of God + disciples of Jesus Christ they are theological issues first and before we treat them ideologically it is helpful to recognize that + inquire about it - and study about it + maybe even pray about it.

We believe that God loves the world. The earth has value to the creator: he did not make a mistake when he created it~~a the material side of existence is not tainted~~. We believe that our fundamental role as children of God is to live responsibly in the world he has created. We believe he has given us dominion over the creation and that exercising that dominion means first of all accountability to him and to the other members of the human family. with whom we share the earth particularly them & whom you + I will pass it on.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." To be meek is the opposite of being arrogant. It is to know that all is a gift. It is a fundamental way of looking at other people, ones own life, the world - not self as achievements we have had to hammer out, but as gifts ~~that~~ which have come to us without our deserving them. To be meek is to receive life as a marvelous gift, and to be profoundly grateful for it.

It is to receive the world, new each day, as God's particular gift - entrusted to our care. ~~a world Gerard Manley Hopkins described as "charged with the grandeur of God."~~

To be meek is to be capable of wonder at the fact that the sun came up this morning, that the balance between oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide ~~is within limits I can breath~~ makes the air breathable again today.* It is to be capable of delight in the "thingness" of life: the tastes, smells, touches, sense experiences which contain the goodness of God.

It is to be capable of gratitude for oneself: for this utterly astonishing complex of organs which somehow provides for the capacity to enjoy a Bach fugue, build a computer, climb a mountain, make love and sing a hymn. To be meek is to be capable of gratitude for the simple fact of our being - for the incredible process through which someone who wasn't, now is. ~~for the single cell beginning which became head, hands, heart, brain.~~

The ones who inherit the earth are those who can be grateful for it; ~~and behind it,~~ and creating, for the sustaining love of God. That's the Christian focus. In Jesus Christ we know that the universe is friendly, that the Lord of creation is for us and neither against us nor neutral about us: that in

~~To inherit life is to receive it - to be grateful for it. To own life is to know that it is a gift.~~

#1 The poets help us find words for a meekness
a gratitude so simple it is difficult to express

One of my favorites is ~~E~~ E. E Cummings ..

" i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of
trees
and a blue dream of sky; and for
everything
which is natural which is infinite
which is yes .. "

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[i thank You God
E E. Cummings]

#2 Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance, ..

Glory be to God for dappled things -
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout
that swim.....

With swift, slow: sweet, sour, adazzle, di
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past cha

Praise him.

good times and bad; in plenty and poverty: in life and in death - his love is sure. [redacted].

Those extraordinary saints, perched on the edge of a new world - a new future - discovered that: they learned to care for the earth - they learned to count on God: Lord. May we learn, as well, in our day. Amen